

## Original Paper

# NEO-CONFUCIANISM AND PHYSIOTHERAPY: THE MIND-BODY-SPIRIT CONNECTION

Elizabeth Dean, P.T., Ph.D.

**Abstract:** This article examines the influence of traditional Chinese philosophy, in particular Neo-Confucianism, on our understanding of health, ill health and health care; and its role in contemporary physiotherapy practice in Hong Kong and China. Neo-Confucianism, a blend of Taoism and Buddhism with traditional Confucianism, has been a principal influence on the beliefs, attitudes and values of the Chinese people for 2,000 years. These philosophies are discussed in the context of the dominance and limitations of Western-based health care practice; the implications for Eastern-based health care practices; the contemporary definition of health by the World Health Organization; and health care trends and reform in Hong Kong. The practice of physiotherapy in Hong Kong provides a template for merging Eastern and Western philosophies in health care. Merging these philosophies reinforces the mind-body-spirit connection as a basis for understanding health and health care needs, and addresses the limitations of either philosophy individually in contemporary health care. Further, merging Eastern and Western philosophies provides a framework for the global advancement and development of physiotherapy practice, professional education and research.

**Key words:** physiotherapy, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, health care

## Introduction

Dating back 2,000 years, traditional Chinese medicine is the most ancient formalized health care practice in the world. Despite this, global health care has largely reflected Western practices, still in its infancy when compared with Eastern practices, in particular, Chinese medicine. Although Eastern health care practices such as acupuncture, herbal remedies and *T'ai Chi* are gaining acceptance and attracting more research efforts in the West, Eastern and Western health care practices continue to be viewed as distinct disciplines, with few proposing a combination of the two as an integrated approach to health care.

Unlike medicine, the traditional Chinese counterpart for physiotherapy is less well defined. However, areas of traditional practice in Chinese medicine such as bone setting, acupressure and remedial massage may provide some basis for such a counterpart. The profession of physiotherapy has its formal origins in the

Western health care system dating back less than a century. Like Western medicine, contemporary physiotherapy has emanated from a reductionistic mechanical view of the workings of the human body, the so-called Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm [1]. In this paradigm, health care problems were viewed as 'legitimate' or 'real' only if they were observable and measurable. This paradigm served as a foundation for the traditional biomedical model of health care, which has also been the prevailing model underlying physiotherapy until the last few decades [2].

## Dominance and Limitations of Western-based Health Care Practice

Until quite recently, Western scientists have largely rejected the efficacy of Eastern approaches, believing them to be 'soft', intangible or too abstract; any efficacy demonstrated was usually attributed to the placebo effect. The political and economic dominance of the

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Visiting Professor, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong; and Professor, School of Rehabilitation Sciences, University of British Columbia, Canada.

Reprint requests and correspondence to: Elizabeth Dean, Professor School of Rehabilitation Sciences, University of British Columbia, Canada

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West may have contributed to the perception, even by Asians, that Eastern approaches to health care are less credible than Western approaches. In addition, the increasing consumer orientation in society and the 'quick fix' attitude to health care problems may reflect the impact of social and technological changes on beliefs regarding the management of health-related problems.

Although scientific advances in the control of acute infectious disease and crisis intervention have been undeniable, the efficacy of Western medicine in the management of progressive degenerative conditions has been less impressive [3, 4]. Seeking more effective care, the general public in the West has been leaning toward alternative health care approaches. Several trends in the West have contributed to a growing interest in alternative approaches, including traditional Chinese health care practices. These trends include:

- the marginal impact of increased resource-intensive health care and the realization that the 'amount' of health care does not equal health,
- the weak relationship between physical impairment and quality of life,
- the prevailing dissatisfaction of the public and lack of confidence in conventional health care,
- the power inequality between the public and their health care providers,
- the neglect of sick people whose ailments are not within the scope of therapies of interest to the medical profession, and
- the commensurate growth of iatrogenic medicine with increasingly invasive medical care, and its associated costs (iatrogenic medicine specializes in the adverse side effects of traditional invasive medical interventions).

### ***Implications for Eastern-based Health Care Practices***

Traditional Chinese medicine reflects the major Eastern philosophical and religious beliefs, and is rooted in the spiritual systems of Taoism and Buddhism superimposed on Confucianism [5, 6]. Neo-Confucianism refers to the blend of these influences.

Examining the efficacy of Chinese therapies in the context of their underlying philosophy has been identified as a goal of the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Their academic programme is the sole provider of professional and graduate education in physiotherapy in Hong Kong, and in terms of internationally recognized standards, for Mainland China also. Professor Christina Wan-ying Hui-Chan, Head of the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, has established "*East meets West*" as an area of strategic development. Its goal is to merge the best of the East and the best of the West in terms of health care approaches in physiotherapy.

Neo-Confucianism has had a principal influence on the

beliefs, attitudes and values of the Chinese people, who constitute 20% of the world population [7]. Over time, traditional beliefs and values have evolved and changed as a result of external influences on culture. In addition, the extent of the influence of external factors varies from one individual to another. Nevertheless, an understanding of Neo-Confucianism in physiotherapy can provide a template for merging Eastern and Western philosophies to optimize health care practice globally. Merging these philosophies reinforces the mind-body-spirit connection, thereby addressing the apparent limitations of either philosophy individually in contemporary health care. Analysis of these factors in the context of physiotherapy and contemporary health care is appropriate given the increasing global prevalence of progressive chronic conditions amenable to long-term rehabilitation.

This article examines the influence of traditional Chinese philosophy on health and health care, with particular attention to Neo-Confucian philosophy; and the implications for the profession of physiotherapy in Hong Kong, China, and the rest of the world. This initiative is consistent with priorities in health care reform in Hong Kong with respect to the delivery of culturally appropriate and evidence-based health care. Specifically, I review contemporary definitions of health, health care trends, and directions of health care reform. I then provide a historical perspective of Neo-Confucian thought, including Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Finally, I describe how these can be integrated into physiotherapy practice, professional education and research.

An integrated understanding of Eastern and Western philosophies, hence the mind-body-spirit connection, can provide a framework for the contemporary understanding of health and the optimization of health care worldwide, particularly with respect to long-term disabling conditions.

### **Definition of Health**

The World Health Organization has defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" [8–10]. This definition is an improvement over the simplistic view of the body as rooted in Newtonian physics, that health reflected the functioning of the organ systems, such as the cardiovascular, respiratory, alimentary, and nervous systems, and the perception that health is merely the absence of disease.

Because of the challenges of defining and quantifying the human spirit, the spirit has been largely neglected in Western health care practice when compared with Eastern approaches. Spirituality represents a dimension of life and health, as the mind and body can 'empower' or 'disempower' every cell, tissue or organ. Although not well understood, the relationship between spirituality and health appears to be reciprocal, in that

health promotes spirituality, and spirituality promotes health. Thus, there is a case for including spirituality as the fourth dimension of health. The totality of these four dimensions is encompassed in the phenomenon of 'chi' in Eastern philosophy and traditional Chinese medicine. No comparable term exists in Western-based health care.

## Health Care Trends

Over the past 20 years, the efficacy and cost effectiveness of health care has been under increasing scrutiny. Despite the increased resources invested in health care in industrialized countries, the benefits to societal health have been marginal at best. To help resolve this dilemma, health care professionals have become increasingly accountable for the services they deliver in terms of evidence-based practice.

Unlike any other time in history, management of acute infectious conditions has been largely replaced, at least in the industrialized world, with the need to manage chronic degenerative conditions such as heart and lung conditions, cancer, stroke and hypertension, diabetes, arthritis and osteoporosis. These conditions have been ironically termed as 'diseases of civilization' or 'affluence', and have been declared to be largely preventable by the World Health Organization [8, 9]. Modification of lifestyle behaviours such as physical inactivity, being overweight, diet and nutrition, smoking, alcohol consumption and other types of substance abuse, and stressful living would significantly alleviate the epidemic of these 'diseases of civilization'. These conditions have become leading causes of mortality in Hong Kong and China [8], and their prevalence is linked to the aging of the population. Even in the developing world, and possibly as a result of the trend of 'Westernization' there, these conditions constitute an increasingly serious public health concern, and have been declared to be of epidemic proportions.

## Health Care Reform

The document titled "*Lifelong Investment in Health*" is Hong Kong's template for health care reform in Hong Kong, and is based on an invited review of the health care system conducted in 1997 by the School of Public Health, Harvard University [11]. The essence of this document is comparable to reforms in health care proposed in other industrialized countries. For example, it includes the need to define appropriate and meaningful health outcomes, to decrease hospital-based and doctor-based care, to increase community-based care, to reduce health care costs, and to enhance cultural relevance and sensitivity of health care.

Consistent with the demands on contemporary health care, non-invasive practices such as physiotherapy (with the exceptions of invasive practices such as acupuncture

and airway suctioning) needs to be exploited whenever possible over invasive care (drugs and surgery), for ethical and economic reasons as well as clinical efficacy. With the advances in 'high tech' medicine and the commensurate increased probability of iatrogenic or medically-induced negative effects, the need for non-invasive, 'low tech' care correspondingly increases. The common theme among health care reform initiatives worldwide is the promotion of lifelong positive health habits.

## Neo-Confucianism: Predominant Chinese Philosophy

### Neo-Confucianism

Neo-Confucianism is a blend of Taoism and Buddhism with traditional Confucianism. Table 1 shows the evolution of these distinct philosophical and religious influences across the predominant Chinese dynasties.

### Confucianism

Confucius is the most well-known and influential Chinese philosopher in China [6]. His thoughts have influenced the development of Chinese culture throughout history, and have shaped the political, economic and technological advances in Hong Kong and China to the present day. His life and philosophy are described in the *Analects* [12]. He lived during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when Buddha and Lao Tzu, the Father of Taoism, also flourished. The philosophy of Confucius is best described in the *Tao Teh Ching*, or the *I Ching*, a work traditionally attributed to Lao Tzu.

Confucius proposed the ideas of life fulfillment through associating with others, first in family life, then in community life, followed by national life. He emphasized social order and an active life, and was greatly concerned about sincerity, or *hsin*. *Teh* refers to the power of each particular being to behave in accordance with its own nature. Opposition is the source of all growth. *Yin* and *Yang* are opposites and refer to the beginning and end of all things in nature, consisting of heaven, every human being and the earth [1, 5, 6].

### Taoism

Taoists often call their study the "science of essence and life" [6, 11]. The science of essence deals with the mind; the science of life deals with the body. Their object is to nurture and enhance what they term as the bases of human existence, namely vitality, energy and spirit, with each having an abstract and a concrete dimension (Table 2). As these three centres interact, the quality and proportion of their mutual influence relate directly to the total state of mental and physical well-being.

Taoist theory purports the unification of vitality, energy and spirit as the essence of wholeness and health [6, 13, 14]. With respect to the body, vitality is associated

**Table 1. Dynasties, people and events. Adapted from references 5 and 7.**

Dynasty	People and Events
Legendary Period (2852–2197 B.C.)	Fu Xi-Yin Yang Shen Nong Huang Di
Primitive Dynasties (2197–221 B.C.) Xia (Hsia) (1994–1523 B.C.) Shang (Yin) (1523–1027 B.C.) Zhou (Chou) (1027–221 B.C.)	‘Great Flood’ brought under control Casting of bronze <b>Confucius, Lao Tzu (Father of Taoism),</b> and Mencius
Ancient Dynasties (221 B.C.–618 A.D.) Qin (Ch’in) (221–207 B.C.) Han (207 B.C.–220 A.D.)  Three Kingdoms (220–265 A.D.) Jin (Chin) (265–420 A.D.) North and South (420–589 A.D.) Sui (589–618 A.D.)	Great Wall built; languages standardized <b>Confucianism</b> established <b>Buddhism</b> introduced (64 A.D.)  <b>Buddhism</b> well developed
Medieval Dynasties (618–1368 A.D.) Tang (T’ang) (618–905 A.D.) Five Dynasties (905–960 A.D.) Song (Sung) (960–1279 A.D.) Yuan (Mongol) (1280–1368 A.D.)	Arts and literature developed, printing invented  <b>Neo-Confucian philosophy</b> Marco Polo to China
Modern Dynasties (1368–1911 A.D.) Ming (1368–1644 A.D.) Qing (Ch’ing, Manchu) (1644–1911 A.D.)	Painting, industry, all arts flourish Opium War. T’aiping Rebellion

with the loins, energy with the thorax, and spirit with the brain. These areas are respectively referred to as the lower, middle and upper fields of elixir, and are used to focus attention in healing, energizing and meditative exercises. Vitality, energy and spirit can be defined in terms of three bodies: vitality is the flesh and blood body; energy is the electrical body within the flesh and blood body; and spirit is the ethereal body of consciousness within the electrical body.

Alternatively, vitality is the natural world, energy is the social world, and spirit is the psychological world. Many Taoists are concerned with the means of enhancing vitality, energy and spirit. Included among these are sexual techniques (Chinese sexology) for vitality, movements and exercises for energy, and meditations for the spirit.

Taoism concentrates on individual life, nature and tranquility, and is embodied in Lao Tzu’s book, the *I Ching* [14–17]. Although only 5,250 Chinese characters in length, the *I Ching* has been one of the most influential books in the world. Taoism, like Confucianism, has both a philosophical and a religious tradition. Lao Tzu emphasized the role of nature in a balanced life. Techniques of self-cultivation including *Qi Gong*, *T’ai Chi Ch’uan* or *T’ai Chi*, and meditation were derived from the teachings of Lao Tzu [5].

*T’ai Chi* can be considered a physical expression and manifestation of the principles and philosophy of Taoism. The styles of *T’ai Chi* depend on the distinct emphasis on

the balance of *Yin* and *Yang* [18, 19], and the integration of the mind, breath and activity. An understanding of Tao is based on an understanding of *Yin* and *Yang*. Tao is the way of nature that proceeds through comings and goings, beginnings and endings.

The goal of *T’ai Chi* is relaxation of the mind and body to promote the flow of *chi* or energy through the body, thus incorporating elements of *Qi Gong*. The purpose of *Qi Gong* is to release energy blocks by relaxing the mind, body and emotions. Not all *Qi Gong* is performed during movements, but can be performed in sitting and lying positions. *T’ai Chi* is characterized by fluid movement patterns, involving weight shifting from one to two legs, with vertical postural alignment.

So-called energy work is probably the most popular aspect of Taoism in both the East and the West, especially through the widespread practice of *T’ai Chi Ch’uan* and therapeutic techniques such as acupuncture and Chinese massage. The practice of special exercises for health and longevity is extremely ancient in China, and many different forms and styles have developed over the centuries (Table 3).

### **Buddhism**

From the third and fourth centuries onward, Taoism was increasingly influenced by Buddhism, which began to filter into China near the end of the Han Dynasty. During the Sung Dynasty, the influence of the Taoist movement was

**Table 2. The three centres of the individual based on Taoist theory and their abstract and concrete dimensions. Adapted from reference 5.**

Centres	Abstract Dimension	Concrete Dimension
Vitality Energy Spirit	Creativity Movement, heat and power Essence of mind and consciousness	Sexuality Breath, magnetism and strength Thought and reflection

termed Complete Reality, and it emphasized the integration of Buddhism and Confucianism with Taoism [1].

The confluence of Buddhism with Taoism in China is termed *Ch'an* or Zen Buddhism. It has been regarded as the fullest development of Taoism whose goal is enlightenment of the mind. *Ch'an* Buddhism is philosophically consistent with Taoism and the *Tao Teh Ching* [17]. Other consistent Chinese philosophies at that time, the *Yin-Yang* Theory and the balance of opposites in life, were also integrated into *Ch'an* Buddhism.

## Implications for the Profession of Physiotherapy in Hong Kong

### Research

Comparable to physiotherapy professional programmes worldwide that are recognized by the World Confederation

of Physical Therapy, the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the sole provider of such education in Hong Kong, primarily reflects Western-based professional education. However, its programme does have some unique features.

Professor Hui-Chan, Head of the Department since 1995, has spearheaded an "*East meets West*" initiative designed to foster research that merges Eastern and Western based practices and philosophies. This initiative permeates clinical practice and professional education as well as research within the department. Further, this initiative is consistent with health care reform in Hong Kong with respect to the provision of culturally sensitive health care services.

*Chi* or life energy may never be completely definable or measurable. However, capturing electromagnetic images through the application of Kirlian photography has been one approach to observing and measuring *chi*

**Table 3. Health and longevity exercises emanating from Taoist philosophy. Adapted from references 1 and 7.**

Type of exercise	Dynasty/originator	Characteristic features
"Play of the five animals"	Late Han dynasty. Hua T'o, a leading physician	Stylized movements patterned after those of the tiger, deer, monkey, bear and crane
Type of shadow boxing associated with martial arts <i>His sui ching</i> or "course in washing the marrow" <i>I chin ching</i> or "course in easing the sinews"	5th or 6th century. Indian Buddhist monk, Bodhidharma	Introduced for monks specializing in meditation to maintain conditioning Set of mind-body exercises for profound relaxation and purification Elementary physical training
<i>Pa tuan chin</i> or "eight step brocade"	T'ang Dynasty (618–905 A.D.) Chung-li Ch'uan	Distinguished by simplicity and flexibility; adjusted to fit the physical condition of the individual, requires little space and time
<i>T'ai chi ch'uan</i> or "absolute boxing"	13th and 14th centuries	The most famous of the Taoist exercise systems. Said to have been invented by Chang San-feng, one of the most popular figures of Taoist legend. Associated with the influential School of Complete Reality
<i>Qi Gong</i> (Taoist breathing)	Mentioned in Chinese chronicles as early as 122 B.C.	Energy works or energetics. Preserves many elements of Taoist and Buddhist mind-body elements. Contemporary practice, emphasis on physical elements and devoid of religious overtones

scientifically by investigators [20, 21]. The degree to which this photographic imaging technique actually reflects *chi*, its validity and its methodological characteristics warrant detailed objective study. This avenue of research could be useful in refining a diagnostic tool as well as outcome measures or indices associated with *chi*.

Because of the qualitative nature of sociocultural factors, including religious and philosophical beliefs, qualitative as well as quantitative research is needed to define the type and extent of these influences in patients in Hong Kong and China, and to assist with the development of culturally-appropriate treatment regimens in the “*East meets West*” area of strategic initiatives.

### **Clinical Practice and Professional Education**

With respect to clinical practice professional education, most academic programmes in physiotherapy include courses in psychosocial and sociocultural issues. These courses are essential for reflecting the unique aspects of a particular culture, and aid in the delivery of better service to patients originating from Eastern countries who are residing in non-Eastern countries (an increasingly common issue in health care delivery as the world becomes a smaller place). In this context, special attention needs to be given to acknowledging some of the limitations of Western-based course content. The attitudes, values and beliefs of various segments of the Hong Kong and Mainland China population need to be discussed and contrasted with patients from Western countries.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Failures in Western and Eastern based health care approaches suggest that one approach alone may be too narrow, and that optimal health care may come from an integration of several health care philosophies. However, global health care tends to reflect Western-based approaches despite the 2,000 year practice of traditional Chinese medicine.

The primary institution responsible for the education of physiotherapists in Hong Kong is the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In recent years, the Department has developed an “*East meets West*” initiative in research. This unique programme is providing information and insights for inclusion in clinical practice and the professional education curriculum. An understanding of the primary Chinese philosophical influences such as Neo-Confucianism, a blend of Taoism and Buddhism with Confucianism, is essential in order to identify appropriate research questions and priorities, measurement tools, and interpretation of research findings, and also to optimize the structure of service delivery in Hong Kong and China. The community of professional physiotherapists in Hong Kong is uniquely situated at the forefront

of the merging of the best of the East and the West to enhance our understanding of health and ill health; and to optimize health care.

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